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[izdihar.jurnalpba@umm.ac.id](mailto:izdihar.jurnalpba@umm.ac.id)

# Integrating Behaviorist–Structuralist and Cognitive–Transformative Approaches in Arabic Language Learning

Muhamad Fuad Hasim<sup>a,1</sup>, Hisbullah Huda<sup>a,2</sup>, M. Baihaqi<sup>a,3</sup>, Nelly Sakinah<sup>a,4</sup>,  
M.Hudzaifah<sup>b,5</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia

<sup>b</sup>Universitas Islam Madinah, Saudi Arabia

<sup>1</sup>[hasimfuadmuhamad@gmail.com](mailto:hasimfuadmuhamad@gmail.com)\*, <sup>2</sup>[hisbullahhuda@uinsa.ac.id](mailto:hisbullahhuda@uinsa.ac.id), <sup>3</sup>[baihaqi@uinsa.ac.id](mailto:baihaqi@uinsa.ac.id),

<sup>4</sup>[sakinahnelly.28@gmail.com](mailto:sakinahnelly.28@gmail.com), <sup>5</sup>[441027673@stu.iu.edu.sa](mailto:441027673@stu.iu.edu.sa)

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#### \*Corresponding Author:

Name: **Muhamad Fuad Hasim**

Email:

[hasimfuadmuhamad@gmail.com](mailto:hasimfuadmuhamad@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This study addresses the need for Arabic language learning approaches that emphasize structural mastery, cognitive understanding, and generative language ability. It examines the implementation of behavioristic, structuralist, and cognitive transformative generative approaches in Arabic instruction for seventh-grade students at MTs Miftahul Afkar, Kediri. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with the Arabic teacher, and document analysis conducted from February 3 to February 28, 2025. The findings show that the behavioristic structuralist approach supports habit formation and structural accuracy, while cognitive and transformative generative principles promote meaningful understanding and independent language production. The study concludes that integrating these approaches leads to systematic and transformative Arabic language learning and highlights the importance of developmentally sequenced instruction in madrasah education.

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### Keyword

Arabic language learning; behavioristic-structuralist approach; cognitive transformative generative principles

### مستخلص البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى معالجة الحاجة الى مقارنة تعليمية في تعليم اللغة العربية لا تقتصر على ضبط البنية اللغوية فحسب بل تسهم ايضا في تنمية الفهم المعرفي والقدرة التوليدية لدى المتعلمين. وتهدف الدراسة الى تحليل تطبيق المقاربة التعليمية القائمة على النظرية السلوكية البنوية ومبادئ التعلم المعرفي والتحويلي التوليدي في تعليم اللغة العربية لدى طلاب الصف السابع بمدرسة مفتاح الافكار المتوسطة الاسلامية في كديري. استخدمت الدراسة المنهج النوعي بتصميم دراسة الحالة. تم جمع البيانات من خلال الملاحظة الصفية والمقابلة المتعمقة مع معلم اللغة العربية وتحليل الوثائق خلال الفترة من الثالث حتى الثامن والعشرين من فبراير ٢٠٢٥. وتظهر النتائج ان المقاربة السلوكية البنوية اسهمت في بناء العادات اللغوية وضبط التراكيب بينما دعمت المبادئ المعرفية والتحويلية التوليدية تنمية الفهم العميق والقدرة على انتاج تراكيب لغوية متنوعة. وتخلص الدراسة الى ان التكامل بين المقاربتين يحقق تعليما لغويا منظما وذا معنى وقادرا على تحويل كفايات المتعلمين اللغوية. وتشير النتائج الى اهمية تصميم تعليم اللغة العربية بصورة تكاملية ومتدرجة في مرحلة التعليم المتوسط.

تعليم اللغة العربية؛ السلوكية البنوية؛ المعرفي التحويلي التوليدي

كلمات أساسية

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## INTRODUCTION

Arabic language learning in junior high Islamic educational institutions currently stands at a crossroads between classical pedagogical traditions and the demands of modern learning. Arabic is not only a means of communication, but also an instrument for understanding Islamic texts with complex linguistic structures (Hasim, Taufiq, Ramadhani, dkk., 2025). Consequently, Arabic language learning differs in characteristics from other foreign language learning, especially at novice levels, such as in *madrasahs* or Islamic junior high schools.

Arabic language learning in *madrasahs* is heavily influenced by a behaviorist-structuralist approach that emphasizes habituation, repetition, and systematic mastery of language patterns. This approach is considered effective in developing grammatical accuracy and precision of language form, particularly in mastering vocabulary and basic structures (Amalia dkk., 2025). Drillings, memorization, and controlled practice are the dominant strategies in Arabic language learning used in this approach. However, the long-term dominance of the behaviorist-structuralist approach raises concerns regarding pedagogical issues. Heavy emphasis on mechanical repetition tends to produce students who are able to imitate language forms but lack an understanding of the meaning, function, and usage (Corballis, 2020). As a result, the language skills developed are shallow and the students find difficulties in facing more complex communication situations or texts.

The advancement in educational science and applied linguistics offers cognitive and generative approaches to address the aforementioned issues. The cognitive-transformative generative theory views language learning as an active mental process that involves the construction of meaning, internalization of rules, and the transformation of linguistic knowledge (Chen & Xiao, 2025). This perspective puts students as active subjects who construct language understanding through interaction, reflection, and linguistic problem-solving. The generative cognitive-transformative approach offers advantages in developing language awareness and higher-order thinking skills by allowing students to produce language correctly and understand the rationale behind the use of certain structures. However, the implementation of this approach in Arabic language learning at the junior high school level is constrained by variations in students' initial language skills and the emphasis on structural learning in the current curriculum.

There is a dilemma to choose between the need for structural familiarization and the need to develop meaningful cognitive understanding. On one hand, teachers need to ensure that students master the language forms correctly, but they are also required to foster deeper conceptual understanding and linguistic thinking skills (Hasim, Taufiq, Baihaqi, dkk., 2025). Previous studies

have shown that the behaviorist-structuralist approach is still widely used in Arabic language learning because it is considered practical and suitable for novice learners (Ainiy dkk., 2022). However, these studies also indicate the limitations of this approach in developing reflective thinking skills and understanding the contextual meaning of language.

Research examining the application of cognitive and generative approaches in foreign language learning shows positive results in improving students' understanding of linguistic concepts and analytical abilities (Syagif, 2024). However, most of these studies were conducted on English or other foreign language learning at the senior secondary and tertiary levels. Hence, their relevance to Arabic language learning in Islamic junior secondary schools is still limited. Studies that specifically discuss the integration of behaviorist-structuralist and cognitive-transformative generative approaches in Arabic language learning are still very limited. Some studies tend to compare the two approaches dichotomously, as if they were mutually exclusive (Mehrad dkk., 2024). Whereas teachers often combine various approaches intuitively without a clear theoretical framework.

The lack of qualitative studies that examine the operational aspects of these learning theories in real classrooms presents a research gap in this domain. Previous studies were mostly quantitative, with a focus on learning outcomes, they are not comprehensive in explaining pedagogical dynamics, student responses, and teacher considerations in integrating distinct approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This gap is both contextual and conceptual from the tensions, intersections, and potential complementarities between the two approaches in pedagogical practice.

The present study was performed to offer conceptual and pedagogical solutions by analyzing the two approaches as frameworks that can be strategically integrated. The behaviorist-structuralist approach can be used to build a linguistic foundation through habituation and pattern mastery, while the cognitive-transformative generative approach is utilized to encourage understanding of meaning, reflection, and internalization of language rules. The present study proposes an Arabic language learning model that is realistic, contextual, and based on a strong theoretical basis. In the learning process at MTs Miftahul Afkar Kediri, students showed heterogeneous abilities and limited learning time. There was a need for a practically effective and cognitively meaningful learning approach.

This study describes how learning approaches based on behaviorist-structuralist and cognitive-transformative generative theories are implemented in seventh-grade Arabic language learning. Furthermore, the pedagogical dynamics that emerge, including students' cognitive and behavioral responses to learning

practices that integrate these two approaches, are also described. This study contributes to the development of Arabic language learning studies, particularly in enriching theoretical discourse on the integration of learning approaches. Theoretically, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how different learning theories can complement each other in the dimensions of Islamic education. The findings of this study are expected to become a practical reference for Arabic language teachers in designing learning methods that balance structural accuracy and depth of cognitive understanding. The main strength of this study lies in the depth of its qualitative analysis and its relevance to actual learning practices for the development of Arabic language pedagogy in Indonesia.

## METHOD

This qualitative study was performed in the form of a case study to deeply understand the implementation process of learning approaches based on behaviorist-structuralist and cognitive-transformative generative theories in the Arabic language learning process. According to Creswell, qualitative research emphasizes the exploration of meaning, processes, and a holistic understanding of social phenomena based on the perspectives of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The case study design allows researchers to study a phenomenon intensively, in focus, and contextually in a particular location.

This research was conducted at MTs Miftahul Afkar, Kediri Regency, involving 32 seventh-grade students to represent the early language learning stage. Hence, the effectiveness of the behaviorist-structuralist and cognitive-transformative generative approaches can be examined simultaneously. This research took place from February 3, 2025, to February 28, 2025. During this period, a series of research activities was conducted, including initial observations, learning implementation, ongoing observations, and in-depth interviews in a naturalistic manner without artificially manipulating learning conditions.

The behaviorist-structuralist approach in this research refers to the views of some behaviorists, such as BF Skinner who emphasizes learning as a result of stimulus, response, and reinforcement (Skinner, 2011). The structuralist thinking by Leonard Bloomfield, which emphasizes mastery of language patterns and structures through repeated practice, was also used as the reference (Fought, 1999). In the Arabic language learning process, the learning activities within this approach include structural drilling, repetition of *sharf and nahwu* patterns, and habituation to the use of correct language forms. Meanwhile, the cognitive-transformative generative approach refers to Jean Piaget's cognitive theory,

which emphasizes the process of actively constructing knowledge (Grider, 1993), as well as the generative linguistic theory by Noam Chomsky, which views language as a creative system built through the internal competencies of learners (Chomsky, 2021). The transformative element in this study refers to the process of reflection, meaning-construction, and the development of students' higher-order thinking skills in Arabic learning.

The data of this study were collected from observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation that involved 7<sup>th</sup> graders, specifically on how teachers implemented the behaviorist-structuralist and cognitive-transformative generative approaches in teaching and learning activities. Initial observations were conducted in the first week of the study to gain initial data, while follow-up observations were conducted throughout the implementation process.

The Arabic language teacher implemented the learning process based on the pre-designed learning materials. At this stage, the teacher integrated structural exercises such as repetition of word and sentence patterns, vocabulary familiarization, and cognitive activities such as discussions of meaning, analysis of word forms, and reflection on language use. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer in recording classroom dynamics, students' responses, and the teacher's pedagogical strategies.

The interview took place after the class to explore the teacher's understanding of the conceptual approach used, the pedagogical considerations, and the teacher's perceptions of students' responses and progress. The interview was made semi-structured to remain focused while still allowing for in-depth exploration of answers.

Data from the documentation were used as supporting data, including data on learning tools, syllabi, lesson plans, teaching materials, and student assignments. Documentation data were used in the triangulation to strengthen the validity of the findings from observations and interviews.

The data obtained in this study were then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model through three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by selecting and grouping data relevant to the research focus. Data presentation was done to create systematic narrative descriptions, while conclusions were drawn gradually and were continuously verified throughout the research process.

Data validity was checked using triangulation by comparing the data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation. Furthermore, researchers cross-checked the data with teachers (member checks) to ensure that their interpretations aligned with the reality of the learning process.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### Implementation of a Behaviorist-Structuralist Theory-Based Learning Approach in Arabic Language Learning

The implementation of a behaviorist-structuralist theory-based learning approach in Arabic language learning in grade VII of MTs Miftahul Afkar Kediri shows a planned, systematic, and oriented pedagogical pattern towards the formation of students' basic language habits. The preliminary observation conducted to map the Arabic language learning process before further analysis allowed the researchers to observe the classroom conditions, students' initial abilities, and teachers' teaching styles. In this preliminary study, most seventh-grade students were still in the novice stage as shown by limited vocabulary mastery and low self-esteem. Therefore, an approach that emphasized habituation and repetition was necessary.

Based on these initial findings, the researchers directly observed how teachers implemented the behaviorist-structuralist approach in teaching and learning activities. Teachers began the lesson by providing language stimuli in the form of vocabulary examples and simple sentences related to the learning theme, such as the theme of البيئة المدرسية and التعرف.

The teacher pronounced the vocabulary and sentence structures clearly and repeatedly, while students were asked to listen attentively before imitating. For example, the teacher said the sentence patterns "هذا كتاب" and "هذا قلم," then the students imitated them in unison. This pattern reflects the stimulus-response principle in the behaviorist theory proposed by B.F. Skinner, where learning behavior emerges in response to stimuli provided by the environment (Goddard, 2023).

The second step was the directed imitation through repetition. After students had been familiar with the initial stimulus, the teacher directed them to imitate the pronunciation and sentence structure repeatedly in unison and individually. Repetition is carried out in several rounds until the students' responses demonstrate a relatively uniform level of pronunciation and structure accuracy. From Skinner's perspective, this repetition fosters habit formation, namely the habituation of language behavior that is considered correct (Chomsky, 2024).

The third step was the structural drilling, in which teachers provided exercises based on the same language patterns with very limited variations. The teacher maintained the same number pattern for *ismiyyah*, but changed the *isim* element as instructed. This practice aligns with Leonard Bloomfield's view of linguistic structuralism, which emphasizes that language should be learned through concrete, observable formal patterns instead of through direct

explanation of abstract rules (Bloomfield, 1973).

The fourth step was providing reinforcement. During the training process, the teacher provided verbal reinforcement such as praise for "correct" or "good," as well as nonverbal reinforcement in the form of positive expressions and gestures of approval. In some situations, students who made correct answers were allowed to repeat their answers in front of the class as social reinforcement. In Skinner's behaviorist theory, reinforcement maintains and increases the frequency of the expected response (Skinner, 2011).

The fifth step was the structured, task-based practice conducted through written and oral activities. Students were asked to fill in missing sentences, match vocabulary to their meanings, and construct simple sentences based on examples provided in the textbook. The variety of student responses was deliberately limited to stay within the framework of the structures they had learned. This demonstrates the dominance of structural accuracy over linguistic creativity.

The steps for implementing the behaviorist-structuralist approach in the field can be seen in the following table.

**Table 1.** Steps in the behaviorist-structuralist approach

No	Learning Steps	Example of Implementation in Class	Theoretical Basis
1	Providing stimulus	The teacher pronounces vocabulary and sentences	Skinner (stimulus–response)
2	Imitation & repetition	Students imitate in unison	Skinner (habit formation)
3	Structural drilling	Sentence pattern substitution exercises	Bloomfield (language structure)
4	Reinforcement	Verbal and nonverbal praise	Skinner (reinforcement)
5	Structured training	Filling and sentence construction	Bloomfield (formal pattern)

The next stage of the field research was data collection through in-depth interviews with the teacher at the end of the research period to explore the teacher's pedagogical rationale for implementing the behaviorist-structuralist approach. The teacher found this approach more suitable for seventh-grade students who still need familiarization and a clear learning structure. The findings of the interview also indicated that the teachers viewed the behaviorist-structuralist approach as an initial stage of learning, instead of a sole approach. The teachers recognized that although students were able to imitate and memorize structures well, they still needed other approaches to develop their language comprehension and creativity.

Throughout the field research, the behaviorist-structuralist approach was found to be effective in improving students' structural accuracy and basic vocabulary mastery. Most students were able to respond quickly to teacher

stimuli and showed improvements in pronunciation and simple sentence construction. This supports the behaviorist assumption that language learning can be facilitated through controlled practice. However, the study also identified limitations to this approach, where some students experienced difficulty in modifying the language structures outside of their practiced patterns. Hence, learning that overemphasizes repetition and reinforcement might limit the development of students' linguistic creativity.

These findings align with Noam Chomsky's critique of behaviorism, which rejects the view that language can be learned solely through stimulus–response. Chomsky asserts that language is creative and generative, and it requires more complex internal cognitive processes (Chomsky, 2024). In this study, this criticism is relevant to explaining why students still need a more advanced learning approach. Even in the Islamic junior high school (*madrasah tsanawiyah*), the behaviorist-structuralist approach is still regarded effective as it provides clearer structure, certainty, and a sense of security for beginning students learning Arabic as a foreign language.

This study confirms that the implementation of a learning approach based on behaviorist-structuralist theory at MTs Miftahul Afkar has been effective and adaptive. The implementation of the approach was not rigid but adjusted to students' needs and initial learning objectives. This finding also serves as a conceptual foundation that integration with an approach based on cognitive and transformative generative principles is a logical and necessary pedagogical step. The behaviorist-structuralist approach builds the initial foundation of Arabic language learning, particularly in the aspects of mastery of structure and language habits. However, to achieve more meaningful and reflective language competencies, this approach needs to be combined with other learning strategies that emphasize cognitive processes and the transformation of student understanding.

### **The Implementation of a Generative Cognitive and Transformative Principle-Based Learning Approach in Arabic Language Learning**

The implementation of a cognitive and transformative generative learning approach in Arabic instruction for seventh-grade students at MTs Miftahul Afkar marks a shift from mechanistic habituation to learning that emphasizes understanding, reflection, and meaning-making. This approach functions as an integrative framework that combines cognitive, transformative, and generative principles in Arabic language education at the madrasah level.

The initial fieldwork stage involved follow-up observations of changes in teachers' instructional strategies after students developed a basic understanding of language structure. The findings showed a reduction in drilling activities and

an increase in opportunities for students to think, interpret, and produce language independently, indicating the early application of cognitive and transformative learning principles.

During the observation, the researchers observed that the teacher began the session with prior knowledge activation activities. For example, before studying a short text about daily activities, the teachers asked stimulating questions in simple Indonesian and Arabic to explore students' experiences. This practice reflects the principles of cognitive learning rooted in Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which emphasizes that learning occurs through the process of assimilation and accommodation of students' existing cognitive structures (Samaiya, 2022).

The first step in implementing this approach is to provide contextual problems based on students' experiences. The teacher may present a simple text or dialogue related to students' everyday lives, then ask them to identify the general meaning of the text before discussing its linguistic structure. Therefore, language is no longer learned solely as a pattern, but as a means of understanding and representing reality.

The second step is a cognitive elaboration process through guided discussions. The teacher may invite the students to discuss the text's content, vocabulary meanings, and the relationships between sentences in groups. Students can be asked to re-explain the text's content in their own words verbally and in written form. This activity reflects that knowledge is built through active student involvement.

The third step is the generative language production, which is a key feature of this approach. Students are not only asked to imitate examples but also to modify and develop sentences based on their understanding. For example, after learning sentence patterns about daily activities, students were asked to construct new sentences describing their own activities. This practice aligns with Noam Chomsky's view of the generative nature of language, that speakers are capable of producing new sentences that have never been heard before (Chomsky, 2021).

The fourth step is the reflection and transformation of language understanding. The teacher invited students to reflect on the difficulties they encountered during the learning process and how they overcame them. Reflection was conducted through open-ended questions and short assignments that encouraged students to reassess their understanding. This stage represents the transformative learning principle developed by Jack Mezirow, where learning is viewed as a process of changing thinking through critical reflection (Mezirow, 2003).

The fifth step is the cognitive reinforcement based on reflective feedback

instead of merely behavioral reinforcement. The teacher provided feedback on the errors and how to correct them, rather than simply stating whether they are right or wrong. This approach represents a shift from behavioristic reinforcement to cognitive feedback that supports the development of student understanding.

The steps for implementing a learning approach based on cognitive and transformative generative principles in class VII MTs Miftahul Afkar are presented in the following table.

**Table 2.** Steps in the cognitive and transformative generative learning approach

No	Learning Steps	Implementation Example	Theoretical Basis
1	Prior knowledge activation	Student experience sparks questions	Piaget (cognitive)
2	Contextual issues	Daily activity text	Piaget (meaningful learning)
3	Cognitive elaboration	Discussion of the meaning of the text	Wittrock (generative learning)
4	Generative production	Composing new sentences	Chomsky (generativism)
5	Transformative reflection	Reflection on learning difficulties	Mezirow (transformative learning)

The next stage of the field research was data collection through in-depth interviews with teachers. The interviews were conducted to explore teachers' perceptions of changes in student responses when the cognitive and transformative generative approaches were implemented. The teacher stated that students became more active and were able to express their opinions confidently, then slowly began using Arabic more flexibly, despite their limited vocabulary.

The teacher viewed this approach as a logical continuation of the behaviorist-structuralist approach. Once students have a foundation in language structure, cognitive and transformative generative approaches can be used to develop their understanding and independent language production skills to promote pedagogical continuity. The approach encourages students to think more reflectively about the language they are learning, instead of simply memorizing the language. This finding aligns with Wittrock's theory of generative learning, stating that effective learning occurs when students actively build connections between new information and prior knowledge (Wittrock, 1992).

However, this study also found that the implementation of this approach requires time and students' cognitive readiness. Some students continue to struggle with independent expression, particularly due to limited vocabulary. This finding suggests that cognitive and transformative generative approaches cannot be applied immediately but depend on a solid structural foundation. The discussion reinforces the view that effective Arabic language learning cannot rely

on a single approach. The behaviorist structuralist approach supports the development of linguistic foundations, while the cognitive and transformative generative approach enhances students' comprehension and creativity.

In the learning process at MTs Miftahul Afkar, the integration of this approach enables seventh-grade students to shift from mere language imitation to more meaningful use. This transformation is reflected not in perfect structural mastery but in students' increased confidence to express ideas and to view language as a tool for communication. Accordingly, the application of cognitive and transformative generative principles contributes to the development of more humanistic and reflective Arabic language learning by fostering linguistic and cognitive awareness gradually, in line with educational goals that emphasize understanding rather than memorization.

These findings confirm that cognitive and transformative generative approaches function as complementary stages to the behaviorist structuralist approach. Their integration allows Arabic language learning to progress from mechanistic habituation to meaningful and reflective learning that supports students' cognitive development.

## CONCLUSIONS

The integration of behavioristic-structuralist theory with cognitive and transformative generative principles provides a complementary contribution to the gradual and sustainable development of students' linguistic competence. This approach serves as an initial foundation through structured practice, repetition, and reinforcement to establish language habits and structural accuracy, while the cognitive-transformative generative approach deepens students' comprehension and ability to produce language independently and purposefully. Although the students were at the early stage of learning, they benefited greatly from systematic pattern presentation and repetitive exercises that allowed the learning process to progressively evolve toward higher-order cognitive activities such as meaning association, structural analysis, and reflective language use across different contexts. The approach enables the students to move beyond mechanical imitation toward internal knowledge construction through assimilation and accommodation processes as theorized by Piaget and Ausubel. The shift from reproductive to productive generative language use is evident in students' ability to produce varied sentence patterns and express ideas flexibly, aligning with Chomsky's generative linguistics and Mezirow's transformative learning theory. This approach is well-suited to Arabic instruction at the *madrasah tsanawiyah* level, especially for seventh-grade students. Future studies should

further examine students' cognitive and generative processes through reflective and free language tasks and extend the approach to higher proficiency levels and more complex skills.

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This paper is expected to bring a positive contribution to the development of more effective and contextual Arabic language learning strategies in Islamic education environments. The findings of this study can be used as a consideration for teachers, curriculum developers, and policy makers in improving the quality of learning.

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